Anthropology of Daily Life Series

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Cultural anthropologists often touch on daily life as part of their studies of other topics, but anthropological scholarship on everyday life is often scattered across works concentrating on other themes. Meanwhile, daily life is becoming an increasingly popular topic of investigation in a variety of other fields of inquiry. By focusing on daily life, this series combines elements from fields as diverse as American Studies, Cultural Geography, European Ethnology, Sociology, Anthropology, Archaeology, Museum Studies, Communication and Culture, Consumer Research, Technology and Society, and Consumption Studies. The **Anthropology of Daily Life** series presents investigations into particular elements of everyday life, focusing on how people use and engage with objects, as well as the practices, activities, and social spaces of daily life. This examination into daily life offers profound insight into the connections between how people see the world and how they act.

Books in the Series

Materializing Poverty: How the Poor Transform Their Lives, by Erin B. Taylor

MATERIALIZING POVERTY

How the Poor Transform Their Lives

Erin B. Taylor

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INTRODUCTION

The Wealth of Poverty

It is an unusually clear summer's day in Santo Domingo. Taking advantage of the break in the torrential tropical rain, Felix is adding concrete bricks to his parents' house. Already under construction for over forty years, the house will never be finished, but it bears no resemblance to the wood and tin structure that his parents, Cristino and Maria, originally bought for fifty pesos in 1972. In fact, it has transformed remarkably since I first visited the family in January 2005. Back then, the house was in a state of flux. Wooden walls were being slowly replaced with concrete blocks, the family kept changing their mind about where doors should be located, and the furniture would be moved around to accommodate the changing shape of the house. The construction of the house wasn't just a practical process for the family; it was a community event. Every afternoon, visitors would gather on the porch to drink sweet coffee and contribute their opinions on the optimal design for the house, both for immediate use and for the family's future growth. In a squatter settlement, builders, architects, and government regulations have little to do with shaping houses. Instead, families and friends build homes with love and a lot of *inventando* (inventing).

To this day, Cristino does not have legal title to his land. While he can prove ownership of his house, he is squatting at the mercy of the state. Yet Cristino does not sit and fret about whether he will lose his home. Much to his disappointment, he was not among those who were

relocated to new apartments in the evictions of 1977 and 1991. Cristino would have liked to have taken his family away from this ***barrio***, with its frequent flooding, landslides, mosquitoes, diseases, and lack of services, but his dream never came true. Nor does it look like eventuating any time soon for his eldest son, Felix, who is raising his own young family in a house that he built in his parents' backyard. His younger brother, Marco, also remains at home. He is helping to finish his parents' house so that he can construct a second floor that will be his own. This family's story is repeated throughout Santo Domingo's barrios, as new generations with little socioeconomic mobility build on the material legacy of their parents.

A few thousand kilometers away, somewhere in the United States, a family is being dispossessed from their home. Since the subprime housing crisis rocked markets and lives in late 2007, more than 3 million mortgages have been foreclosed in the United States (Abel and Tracy 2012). The global financial crisis (GFC), officially bracketed as running its course from 2007 to 2010, is not over for homeowners: a further 2 million foreclosures are in process (ibid.). With a rough average of three people per household in the United States, this represents a total of 15 million people who have lost their home and been forced to seek alternative accommodation. In the first two years, they were more likely than not to be from families that were low income before the GFC, but since unemployment hit a high of 10 percent in October 2009, many are from middle-class backgrounds (Carey 2012). Black families are disproportionately represented in the count of the displaced, as they were more likely to be the subject of "predatory" lending practices and granted a subprime loan with a higher interest rate, resulting in a struggle to pay off mortgages as interest rates rose and times became tougher (Rugh and Massey 2010).

The subprime mortgage crisis and subsequent foreclosures sent shockwaves through Middle America. All of a sudden, impoverishment was not just something that could happen to the unwise and unprepared: rather, an ever-widening array of people were susceptible to crisis. This was not just a concern for economic outcomes: by any measure, losing one's home is an emotionally fraught experience. Our homes, more than any other site, are where we have autonomy to express our identities and create our familial lives. They are also supposed

to provide us with security, which made the extent of house repossessions all the more troubling. To express this new feeling of collective crisis—of so many people being at the mercy of the vicissitudes of the global economy—Americans and many others around the world nicknamed themselves "the 99 percent."

In contrast, most of the large banks that were in crisis (with the exception of Lehman Brothers, which was liquidated) were bailed out by governments. They had been deemed "too big to fail," a term that was first popularized during the Reagan era of the early 1980s, referring to the idea that some financial institutions are so large that allowing them to collapse would send the economy into a tailspin. Against the tenets of liberal ideology, then, these institutions were granted rescue packages, and more regulation was put in place in an attempt to prevent a repeat of the crisis. Anthropologist Gillian Tett, in her analysis of the events leading up to the GFC, puts a slightly different slant on their importance, stating, "Quite apart from whether they were 'too *big* to fail,' they were too interconnected to ignore" (Tett 2009, 224–25). She argues that it was not the size of the institutions' portfolios per se that precipitated the crisis, but the ways in which they traded among themselves, which led to an accumulation of calculation errors and sparked a domino effect when those errors came to light.

This interconnectivity was not something that operated among homeowners, who had vertical relations with lenders rather than horizontal relations with each other—at least, until the 99 percent movement began. That is, there was no representative or advocacy body through which they could lobby for their interests, no shared responsibility or risk, no shared identity. They were spatially dispersed and socially disparate. An atomized group, they could not leverage commonality to protect their wealth.

It is strange, then, that just a few hundred kilometers away, in the Caribbean, Dominican squatters seem to be better off than Americans, at least where housing security and cooperation are concerned. With no land title and no property rights, residents of Santo Domingo's squatter settlements stand no risk of their homes being repossessed by the bank, because they have no mortgages. Nor do they risk their homes being repossessed by the state, for they have safety in numbers: having settled slowly but persistently over the years, there are now tens of thousands of people in the barrios. Much of the land they occupy, especially

around the river near the city center, has a high market value. But the state would not risk a political scandal to dislodge them; nor does it have the capital necessary to relocate them all. Squatter residents face a plethora of other problems, but they have a security of residence that is far superior to that of many people in developing countries. Like the largest banks, their community is "too big to fail."

This idea that squatters may have something in common with large banks that middle Americans do not may seem preposterous, yet it speaks to the complicated nature of wealth and poverty. Poverty is not an absolute condition; it is not even necessarily an objective condition. While there are certainly people who live in abject poverty—in which their lives and health are threatened—most of our judgments regarding who is poor and who is not are subjective and relative. Not only do people around the world have vastly different ways of thinking about their own wealth and the wealth of others, but the experience of loss must also be taken into account, as the process of impoverishment—of becoming poorer than one was before—can intensify one's feeling of being poor even if one is wealthier than average.

Why do subjectivity and relativity matter? I argue that when we label people as "poor" without also investigating their situation as it is seen through their own eyes, we do them a great disservice. As James Holston has pointed out about Brazilian favelas, "poor" people simply do not sit around in a hopeless situation, waiting for someone (state, banks, NGOs, companies) to solve their problems. Rather, they actively construct their lives with the resources that are available to them, including found materials, help from neighbors, bought supplies, and a lot of inventando. Far from being helpless and inactive, poor people command a great deal of "competence and knowledge in the production and consumption of [modern goods]" (Holston 1991, 462). When we look closely at how the poorer segments of society use material and social resources—their wealth—we are forced to rethink our assumptions about poverty as lived experience.

Poverty is generally defined as a lack of material resources, or the possession of the wrong kinds of resources (rags rather than designer clothing, tin houses rather than brick). However, the relationships that poor people have with their possessions are not just about deprivation. Like everyone else, poor people use material forms to creatively construct their personal identities and communities, and to transform their

futures. Indeed, Daniel Miller suggests that consumption may have heightened importance for the poorer segments of society because they depend heavily on the few things they possess in order to create their social identities in the face of an alienating world (Miller 2001). Their relationship to homes, clothes, and other material goods may be more complex and nuanced precisely because the range of goods they have access to is limited.

This book challenges common ideas about poverty. Most ethnographies of poor communities focus on the struggles of living with limited resources or the creative ways in which poor people use their personal possessions. They only rarely investigate how the relationships that poor people have with material things can transform their lives, both individually and collectively. History tells us that human social and cultural life depends on material forms for its expression, regardless of whether we are rich or poor, and that this holds true across time and space. Hunters and gatherers, slum dwellers, and fishing communities alike create artifacts and homes that express their social relations and their individuality in ways that cannot be reduced to an expression of poverty. However, materiality (and the category of "the poor") is also very much part of how inequalities are reproduced. Lack of resources creates very real constraints on life chances, such as not being able to pay for education or not owning the right clothes for a job interview. My analysis pays tribute to the sufferings of the poor, while exploring aspects of poverty that cannot be explained in terms of oppression or resistance alone.

My empirical evidence centers on my fieldwork in the Dominican Republic between 2004 and 2012. I lived for a year in an infamous squatter settlement called La Ciénaga, located on the banks of the Ozama River in Santo Domingo. Settled in the 1960s after the death of the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, La Ciénaga houses approximately 18,000 people living on 35.71 hectares, about 504.06 residents per hectare (Tejeda 2000, 21). Not a single household has a legal land title, but the everyday persistence of families in building their homes, sometimes over decades, has literally cemented their residence in the community. However, the barrio is also materially poor, evident in its many shacks, poor services and utilities, higher risk of natural disasters, low wages, and nonexistence of land titles.

Despite these constraints, residents of La Ciénaga find that their material existence enables them as much as it constrains them, and they

employ all sorts of creative processes and strategies to solve everyday problems and, over a few decades, radically transform the community in which they live. La Ciénaga (literally meaning "the Swamp") may be a ***barrio marginado*** (marginalized barrio), but it is not stagnant as its name suggests. Due to the efforts of its residents, the community does not even remotely resemble the mud-stricken, isolated outpost that Cristino found when he moved there in 1972. The everyday engagements of residents with materiality have generated social change and transformed the status of the community over the past few decades. Today it is a fully urban community, with paved streets, electricity, parks, and an increasing amount of pride.

In fact, the ways in which residents think of themselves has also changed since I first arrived in the barrio. In a survey of three hundred residents that I conducted in November 2005, in response to the open question "What social class do you think you belong to?" 69 percent replied "*pobre*" (poor), 21 percent replied "*clase bajo*" (lower class), 1 percent replied "*clase media baja*" (lower-middle class), and 14 percent replied "*clase media*" (middle class). When I repeated the survey in November 2009, the results were strikingly different. Four years on, just 19 percent of respondents described themselves as poor, while 50 percent described themselves as lower class, 15 percent as lower-middle class, and 21 percent as middle class. Residents had shifted away from viewing themselves as "poor" to instead viewing themselves as being on the bottom of a class rung. Moreover, 21 percent more residents now defined themselves as lower-middle class or middle class. Materially and psychologically, residents were reaping the benefits of the barrio's slow transformation over four decades.

According to the World Bank (2013), the Dominican Republic has been one of the fastest-growing economies over the last decade, with economic growth averaging 9.5 percent from 2005 to 2007. The development of the tourist industry and the construction of industrial free zones (**IFZs**) from the late 1960s shifted the focus of the economy from agriculture to services and assisted in the distribution of economic growth in diverse sites around the country. From 2005 to 2011, the gross national income by purchasing power parity (GNI [PPP]) per capita increased from US$6,020 to US$9,420 (World Bank 2013). In the same period, the number of people living below the national poverty line decreased from 47.8 percent to 40.4 percent. In urban areas,

levels of poverty have consistently been slightly lower than the national average but have decreased more slowly, from 42.8 percent in 2005 and 36.5 percent in 2011. The benefits of this transformation are not even: nearly 40 percent of citizens still live below the poverty line, and the gap between the wealthy and the poor is maintained through the monopolization of social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). However, there is little doubt that life has improved for many poor Dominicans over the last few decades. Overcoming poverty is achieved through actions on numerous fronts: the productive social and economic activities of citizens, changing state policy, and the repositioning of the Dominican Republic in the global economy. In this book I hope to demonstrate the crucial role that individual and collective manipulation of material forms and their social meanings plays in achieving this transformation.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 develops a framework for thinking through what poverty is as an analytical concept. I discuss how our measures of poverty relate to our ideas about ourselves as workers and consumers. I then show how examining our relationships with different kinds of material things—possessions, spaces, and the human body—can help us to understand poverty as a lived experience, not just as an abstract concept. Finally, I describe La Ciénaga, a squatter settlement in Santo Domingo whose poverty and illegality are the very reasons why its residents have been able to successfully migrate to the city and carve out a new kind of life for themselves and their children.

More than any other possession or motivation, the ability to construct one's own home is the reason why La Ciénaga exists. Chapter 2 describes residents' attempts to achieve material security and a measure of control over their social environment. The need to construct housing illegally and without professional assistance is indicative of residents' poverty, and residents are constrained by hard limits, including dangerous living conditions and lack of funds to buy building materials. However, the lifelong process of building one's own home (what James Holston [1991] terms "autoconstruction") on untitled land is also a com-

pelling example of a positive trade-off gained by living in a stigmatized neighborhood. Relative freedom from government intervention means that residents can build and furnish their homes over many years, construct a local society of their own design, and eventually provide themselves with a measure of security from natural disasters and economic crises. As we will see, the freedoms they gain are not limited to building concrete things: they also literally construct a community in which their family members live close by, allowing for a level of public socializing that many middle-class Dominicans lament is disappearing from their lives as the nation retreats indoors in response to crime.

No account of the materiality of poverty could hold without an analysis of property possession and the violence that underlies it. In chapter 3 I explore how residents have maintained a precarious hold on those material accoutrements that are so central to their ability to create a community. Faced with two mass evictions and a four-year blockade by the military, residents have fought prominent battles with the state over issues of land rights and resettlement. During these conflicts, there has rarely been consensus among barrio residents as to what the outcome of these battles should be. Some people were desperate to leave the barrio; others did not wish to be dislodged. Yet one thing persists: new people continue to move into the barrios, and existing residents continue to construct their houses, despite the efforts of the state to halt the process of urbanization. This persistence of need has rendered the barrio as, essentially, "too big to ignore": the state can no longer reclaim the land for development, because relocating its thousands of residents is an economic and political impossibility. It is these everyday efforts to construct the barrio, far more than any organized political resistance, that has made the barrio into a permanent part of the city. Their persistence in occupying the land is a political act in itself: residents have ignored official instructions and instead sought progress in a fashion that they consider accessible to them. That is to say, the politics of squatting—its struggles and ultimate triumph—is borne not of ideology and political coordination, but of everyday material practices constituted over time and in space.

Chapter 4 turns to the role that religion plays in assisting people to interpret the present and dream of the future. I discuss the centrality of organized religion to local ideas of progress, and the tension between improving the material environment versus placing one's hopes for bet-

terment in the afterlife. Some residents believe that the barrio can be transformed into an ideal modern community through widening streets, demolishing shacks, creating parks, and so on. But many other residents believe that there is no hope for the barrio, due to its inherent corruption, ongoing national crises, and even the increase of "wickedness" around the globe. Chronically poor and stigmatized in the media, the only chance of improvement is to escape, by either moving elsewhere or tolerating bad conditions until one is finally rewarded with the second coming of Christ. I demonstrate how even hopes for the future that are based on leaving the material world altogether (this life is bad, but I will be rewarded in the afterlife) are expressed and practiced through material objects. Examining the material practices of religion can illuminate why some people believe in material change, yet others do not.

Chapter 5 serves as a counterbalance to chapter 2's optimistic stance, showing how the freedoms gained through barrio residence are constrained by the social stigma held against the barrio and its residents by the media and the general public. A combination of La Ciénaga's poverty and visibility, coupled with Santo Domingo's rising crime rates, has led to the barrio becoming a master symbol of national failure. A widely accepted spatial dualism defines the city's high ground as respectable and moral, contra the spaces that the barrios occupy in swampy land around the river, whose inferior material qualities lend themselves to interpretations of the barrio's residents as immoral. I examine ten years of media reports about La Ciénaga and its surrounding neighborhoods to show how these poor barrios are conflated in the city's social imaginaries as dangerous and immoral, despite the fact that they differ from one another in significant ways. My analysis compares the views of outsiders and insiders to demonstrate how barrio residents come to terms with their stigmatization and attempt to distance themselves from actual crime and representations of crime.

In chapter 6 I describe how, reluctantly locked into place, residents use materiality to create their own personal identities and make value judgments about their neighbors. Residents of La Ciénaga reproduce the city's spatial dualism within the confines of their own barrio, conflating the level of material development of different barrio spaces with judgments of individuals' moral value. Within this identity politics, people attempt to carve out identities for themselves, whether as respectable homeowners, streetwise people marked out by ownership of mass-

consumption goods, self-styled politicians attempting to transform the barrio, or as Haitian immigrants attempting to gain acceptance despite centuries of ***antihaitianismo*** (anti-Haitianism). Yet barrio residents are not simply pitted against one another: they also draw upon national identity categories that unite more than they divide. This normative value system provides a way for barrio residents to oppose their marginalization and claim a mainstream position in Dominican society. This core identity may be a fiction, but it creates a common narrative that residents draw upon as they make meaning of their lives and move forward into the future.

Finally, the book's coda shifts back to a comparison of the Dominican Republic with Haiti to demonstrate how material poverty and social values are context specific and change over time. I argue that a polyvalent understanding of poverty can help us to understand the vastly different ways in which poverty and social hierarchy are experienced around the world. The experiences and values associated with marginalization are necessarily expressed through our relationship with the object world. Better understanding the materiality of everyday poverty and the world at large can assist in unmasking how poverty is produced, reproduced, and transformed.